



Forgiveness and Justice Julianne Atkinson

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." — Romans 12:19

Seventeen years ago, someone I thought highly of hid behind a computer and lied to me. I did mental gymnastics to attribute my best intentions. It was like talking to a piece of wood. I didn't know at the time the price that I would pay for the lie, and it took me much longer to accept that I was the one to have to pay it. My closest relationships, parts of my reputation, and even my hopes and dreams for my life were damaged. It felt impossible to come back from.

As image bearers, we have a strong sense of simultaneous justice and mercy. It's no accident that God makes it hard to let go of what we see as injustice. Our glorious God manages to uphold both justice and mercy perfectly. We are encouraged by verses not only asking us to forgive but requiring it (Matthew 18:21-35, Ephesians 4:32). I love the tender words of Paul in Romans 12:19. We could think of the quote "vengeance is mine" with a tight, angry fist or even with bitterness that we can't take revenge ourselves. The command to leave vengeance to God is an invitation. God calls us as beloved to let the tears flow, let our laments be heard in heaven, and walk through grief alongside our Savior, who is able to sympathize with our weakness. We can know God will tread the winepress of wrath and personally wipe every tear from our eyes. He knows every offender's true motives, generational sins, and brokenness, the background of trauma, and pain that leads hurt people to hurt people. He alone can see what everyone deserves.

This doesn't make forgiveness always easy. Here are three things I wish I had known about forgiveness from the start. First, the road to healing is longer for some sins than others. We can make the choice to forgive every morning and be on the journey to heal. Our heart doesn't have to be in the tender place we want it, but we have to make the choice and continue doing so. Our hearts follow our heads. Second, forgiving someone means choosing to pay the price in full. We never make a sarcastic comment, use passive aggression, or act in a way that will cause them to suffer for anything they did. Not an iota of the payment falls on them. If you don't do this, you still hold them accountable, and there's no forgiveness. This doesn't mean that the legal system can't do its job. Finally, a bitter heart is poison. Bitterness is a slow death, but not to the offender. It kills the heart harboring unforgiveness. I promise the offender will usually move on and never think of the offense again. The longer you ruminate and let your heart fill with hate, the worse you will get, and they will continue to be fine.

Let's Chat!

- Looking back, what relationships feel unresolved, bitter, or awkward? Sometimes, those feelings can be a flag to circle back around.
- Have you ever told someone you forgive them but continued to make them pay in your hearts or actions?
- Is there anywhere you feel like you could make the choice to forgive, and even continue doing so, today?

Take-away Truth

We can rest in God's unfailing faithfulness, justice, and love, even in our deepest grievances.

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